

In Defense of Religious Education

Abstract:

This paper examines an increasingly common rejection of a parent's right to instill her own religious beliefs in her children or to enroll her child in a religious school for that purpose based on the commitment that children are the moral equals of adults. While accepting and applauding that commitment I argue that the move to protect the putative religious autonomy of children is based on a faulty understanding of parent/child relationships and an equivocation on what is meant by 'autonomy'.

Recent years have seen growing interest in philosophical and ethical issues relating to parenting. Of particular interest has been the question of how much latitude parents rightfully should have over the beliefs and values instilled in their children. A welcomed component of these discussions is a commitment to the moral equality of children. Gone for good, it would seem, is the belief that children are mere property of their parents, or somehow less deserving of moral consideration. As welcomed as this is, however, I will argue here that a misunderstanding of what such moral equality entails has led a number of philosophers to take implausible positions on the moral right of parents to oversee their children's education. A striking instance of this is an increasingly common objection to religious education that strives to instill in children belief in the tenets of a specific faith. The arguments I will be targeting turn on concerns that such an education is incompatible with respect for children's actual or future autonomy. These arguments against religious education depend on an implausible and simplistic understanding of the relationship between parents and children and parental authority.

The Source and Limits of Parental Authority

The principle of moral equality between adults and children might tempt us to think that the relationship between parents and children ought to be modeled, as much as possible, on relationships between equal and competent adults. Autonomy is often thought to be at the core of adult relationships and the source of our rejections of coercive practices that would subordinate the will and aspirations of one person to those of another. A core principle of liberal thought is that so long as they show a

similar respect for others competent adults ought to be free to form their own beliefs and values and live according to them without interference from those who disagree. Applying this to children might seem to mean that choices reserved to adults should be reserved to children as well—anything less seems to slight their equal moral standing and individuality. The freedom to arrive at one’s own religious beliefs is plainly one such decision, and so it seems plausible that we should deny parents the right to deliberately shape their children’s religious beliefs by coercive means.

This is a conclusion many are willing to embrace. As Matthew Clayton pointedly puts it, if we do not allow adults coercive powers to intervene into the religious beliefs and practices of other adults, why should we allow parents the power to do so with their children?¹ To allow such things, James Dwyer argues, is to adopt decidedly “adult centered” ways of understanding of things that, he suggests, “treat children as appendages of their parents, morally and conceptually indistinct from parents, presumed to have identical interests and rights.”² In short, the commitment to the moral equality of children entails allowing them the same space to decide such matters for themselves as we grant adults.

This move from ‘children are the moral equals of adults’ to ‘children should be treated as adults’ seems implausible on its face—children are not adults. Small children in particular lack the cognitive abilities underlying the autonomy we are respecting when we allow adults to make up their own minds, and it is hardly needs

¹ See Matthew Clayton, *Justice and Legitimacy in Childrearing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, (2004).

² James G. Dwyer, *Religious Schools v. Children’s Rights*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, (1998), p. 76.

noting that children will harm themselves (and others) if given more freedom than they are cognitively and emotionally ready to handle.

A more plausible interpretation of children's moral equality is readily available however. This is to insist that any departures from a principle of equal treatment of children be justified in ways that work in the interests of children considered as individuals. This in turn suggests a model of parental authority that is close to unchallenged orthodoxy in contemporary discussions of the ethics of parenting. This account begins with seeing the relationship between parents and children as fiduciary. Given children's inability to manage their own affairs and their dependence on their parents, we can hold parents responsible for protecting and furthering the interests of their children.³ To do so, finally, parents must be given certain rights or privileges when it comes to making and effecting decisions on their child's account. According to this idea, parental authority, including the authority to coerce children to act contrary to their currently expressed will, can be justified if a parent is acting so as to protect and further the child's genuine interests.

The argument against parental attempts to steer their children to adopt controversial religious beliefs seems to follow readily enough from this fiduciary model, and can seem over determined. For one thing, religious convictions seem by their nature to be controversial—questions like whether there is a God or which of all the religions in the world have the truest understanding of God and his will are matters

³ Of course small children cannot consent to fiduciary relationships, but a common tactic is to suppose such consent can be meaningfully secured counterfactually. See Clayton (2004) for a particularly influential version of this argument.

about which intelligent and reasonable people will disagree. Respect for the right of individuals to arrive at their own conclusions about such questions, and to live accordingly, is a cornerstone of liberal thought. It is problematic, then, to use adult authority to lead a child to a specific set of religious beliefs before she is old enough to arrive at her own beliefs. In short, respect for a child's autonomy forces us to the conclusion that using one's parental authority to compel religious beliefs and practices is an abuse of that authority, or so the argument goes.

Beyond the Fiduciary Model: Family Goods and Shared Practices

To appreciate that something has gone wrong here we need to take more seriously the relationship between parents and their children as a specific *kind* of relationship, one that it is by its nature quite different than any existing between capable adults, including the fiduciary relationships so commonly invoked.⁴ This is not to say that the fiduciary model of parental authority is wrong, but if we look at the relationship between parents and children in more depth we can see that it is incomplete and limited in its account of that authority. We can also see that the conception of autonomy in play here is it questionable when applied to children.

Someone is recognized as the parent of a child only when she is willing and able to play a very specific role in the life that child.⁵ That role, in turn, is naturally

⁴ I here draw on arguments presented in Dennis Arjo, *Paradoxes of Liberalism and Parental Authority*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016. Similar arguments are offered by Melissa Moschella, *To Whom do Children Belong*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2016), though there are important differences and I disagree with a number of her conclusions.

⁵ There is an ambiguity here, as we also use "parent", "father", "mother", and the like to signal purely biological relationships. There has been much discussion about the connection between

understood to include a basic and unique responsibility for the child's care and upbringing. As noted, given the cognitive limitations and general immaturity of (small) children, living up to the responsibilities of parenthood requires parents to make decisions on their behalf. This in turn necessitates that parents have some manner of control over the daily lives of their sons and daughters. So it is that we can ground parental authority in some basic considerations about the relationship between parents and children as it is commonly understood. So conceived parental authority is hardly absolute. Being rooted in responsibilities to children, parental authority will not extend to actions and practices that are harmful to children, or incompatible with their care and successful upbringing. Positively, to the extent we can identify goods children must enjoy if we are to say they have been properly cared for and raised, this account provides a robust basis for parental duties.

We might stop here—and many accounts of parental authority essentially do—if we assume parental authority is predicated solely upon and limited to the needs of children to have their individual interests protected and appreciated, or that the only goods of childhood of importance are those a child enjoys individually. However, many childhood goods, including many of the most important, are not amenable to a fiduciary analysis because they do not turn on easily distinguished individual interests. Instead, many childhood goods involve experiences and opportunities that are possible only when they are shared or pursued collectively, by the parent and child together, by a larger family as a whole, or by a community of which the family is a part.

biological parenthood and being a parent in the sense of playing the role of a parent. That is a matter for another time. I am not referring here to parenthood as a biological relationship.

Some of these may be pursued purely for shared enjoyment. Others may come when significant events are recognized and shared together, such as the celebrations of family members' birthdays or graduations, and some may arise when family work through difficulties together. Most often, however, such shared endeavors are woven into the fabric of everyday life as parents and children navigate a shared world, attending to one another's needs and responsibilities and sharing one another's company. As such they invariably reflect the contingencies of cultures, times, and settings that shape all our lives, and the realities of childhood guarantee that such experiences will shape children in ways that have no counterpart in the world of competent adults.⁶

As with all cooperative goods, it would be a misunderstanding to suppose there must be a balancing of independent interests for these shared goods to be pursued in a family or community, or that cooperation emerges only by way of mutual compromise for the sake of individual benefits. Rather, these are times when there is a shared interest that must be pursued collectively if it to be pursued at all, as is the case with things like ensemble musical performances or team sports. Put differently, it is by only by subordinating one's individual interests for the sake of the collective endeavor that its rewards can be enjoyed—in such contexts there is no easy separating of individual and collective intentions or interests. It is these contexts and for the sake of such goods, I am suggesting, that legitimate parental authority is more typically

⁶ Examples of these would include things like sharing meals, household chores, and care of family pets.

exercised than it is in contexts that plausibly suggest a fiduciary relationship.⁷ At times children, especially younger children, may need to be compelled to cooperate with such endeavors as they may not immediately appreciate the need for good behavior in order for a special family dinner to deliver its potential goods for example. But it would again be a misunderstanding to see the exercise of parental authority in such cases as an affront to a child's autonomy.

Religious Education and Controversial Goods

Before turning back to the matter of religious education, we need to mark one more feature of these collective goods of childhood, which is that at some point they become controversial. While we can expect broad agreement on some of the things that enrich and enhance a child's life or contribute to her flourishing, liberal democracies are marked here as elsewhere by considerable disagreement. Some of these disagreements may reflect matters of tastes and preferences—there are families that enjoy attending professional football games together and those that do not—while others turn on ethically charged disagreements. Hunting remains popular in many parts of the US, for example, and many people cherish growing up with the sport and learning to hunt with a parent. Of course others find the sport quite objectionable. In the case of controversial goods like this one would think the liberal position would be

⁷ It is clear, I hope, that I am sketching a normative picture here. In real life, and in families that are mostly flourishing, things can go wrong, and stresses to family relationships or material difficulties can undermine the collective dimensions of family life. It is in these times that doing right by one's child can feel like a sacrifice of one's own interest or well-being. Nor am I denying that parents do have responsibilities that mirror or literally are fiduciary duties. Parents should protect a child's health for the child's sake, not just because it benefits the family as a whole. My point is that it would be a very impoverished family if concern for a child's welfare was limited to furthering the child's interests alone.

to urge tolerance and state neutrality. Jointly this would seem to support the conclusion that decisions about such matters is properly left to parents. Parents who value hunting ought to enjoy the freedom to pass on the tradition to their children, while those with moral objections should be free to forbid their own children from hunting even if they want to, and here too it seems odd to suppose there are threats to a child's autonomy lurking.⁸

I cannot argue it here, but I would contend that healthy family life is marked by these kinds of goods of childhood, and that a child benefits from growing up with such goods. If so, it hardly seems an affront to her autonomy if her parents use their authority to ensure she does. It also seems to me that the education and socialization of a child occurs routinely and seamlessly within and through the pursuit of these kinds of goods. A child who learns to participate in the various collective activities her family pursues learns norms of behavior, ways of interacting and communicating, the importance of deferring to group rules and expectations specific to that practice and so on. She also learns much of how her world is understood to work by her family and communities.

Formal schooling, wherever it happens, will be a part of the shared endeavors that make up a child's overall care and upbringing. The impression is often created that a child's education typically pits her against her parents since the latter may well wish to control what is or is not taught at the child's expense. This, I suggest, is a picture

⁸ This is not to say there are no limits to the kinds of things parents can compel their children to join them in pursuing. Aside from illegal activities, goods whose pursuit is damaging to a child's well-being should not be tolerated.

that should be resisted. It is odd to suppose that when a parent decides to send a child to school it is either for her sake or the child's, and that it is only fortune that leads these two to coincide. Rather, one would hope, a parent's seeks her child's education because it is good for the child and that protecting and promoting what is good for her child is good for her as a parent—that is simply what parents do in the course of seeing to their child's care and upbringing. A child's academic success is shared by the family, and her struggles in school are shared as well. Seeing to a child's education is neither a case of a parent imposing her will on someone else, nor a case of a parent sacrificing her own convictions for the greater good of someone whose needs and interests are separate from and somehow greater than her own.

To see the relevance of these remarks to religious education and the controversies at hand we need to attend to two additional considerations. First, religious education, like education of any sort, will typically be woven into the fabric of family life in the manner I have suggested we see with socialization in general. If it is even only moderately robust, a child's religious upbringing will be reflected in considerably more than what she is expressly told she should or should not believe. It will be continuous with the range of experiences shaped by the decisions and unreflective practices we rightfully expect all parents to make and engage in daily. Depending on the faith and the diligence and commitment of parents, it could color decisions about food, clothing, entertainment, and so on. Often it will involve induction into a community of like-minded families, and of course, it will color the choice parents will quite rightly want to make of where a child should go to school and what she

should learn. Here too we should expect—indeed we should demand—that parents do their best to do right by their children.

That catch of course is that religion is also and quite obviously controversial. Whether it is good for children to grow up within a religious faith, and if so which faith, are matters of deep and abiding disagreement. To be consistent with what was argued above, however, it would seem that the decision to raise a child according to the beliefs and values of a religion should be made by parents. From this perspective, demands that religious private schooling be subordinated to the standards of secular education, or forbidden from encouraging belief in the religion in question, or banned altogether, for example, take on a new and I think unflattering light. While proponents present these proposals as identifying a state obligation to protect children from “educational abuse”, placed into a broader context they begin to look intrinsically intrusive and disruptive because they undermine a parents’ ability to make a decision that seem part and parcel of everyday parental authority. Save for those parents whose personal convictions just happen to coincide with current educational orthodoxy, the presumption seems to be that parents and children are inherently in conflict when it comes the latter’s education, making the state and parents natural adversaries. This, as I urged above, is a conclusion we ought to resist except for those cases where the intended education is demonstrably harmful as opposed to merely controversial.

Does Religious Education Threaten Children’s Autonomy?

That religious education can promote a genuine good of childhood does not show that it necessarily does, and here too parental authority is limited. Again, parents plainly have no moral right to subject their children to woefully inadequate education or

to schooling that is demonstrably harmful—such schooling would be destructive of the very good it purports to serve. This gives philosophical critics of religious education another avenue of attack. If *by its nature* religious education is harmful, then a parent's right to enroll her child in a religious school is rightfully denied. I will finish by considering and rejecting an argument along these lines that again appeals to our obligations to protect children's autonomy. The argument is this: one critical aim of education is the development of autonomy, but religious education by its nature works against this goal. Hence religious education is bad for children. I accept the first premise of this argument, but will suggest that only equivocating on "autonomy" will make the second plausible.

In order to avoid falling into their own brand of illiberalism, liberal thinkers have to assume an understanding of autonomy that is reasonably uncontroversial, and it cannot be denied that many understandings of this vexed notion are quite contentious. Adopting the Rawlsian language frequently used in these discussions, the kind of autonomy that the state ought to be in the business of promoting should be defensible using public reason, and should not be unduly wedded to any particular comprehensive doctrine. According to Rawls this is limited to a basic civic education that "prepares children to be fully cooperating members of society and enables them to be self-supporting."⁹ The problem is that this will hardly suffice to ground arguments against religious education *per se*, as it is amply clear that at least some—and in fact most—religious schooling is able to instill *this* much autonomy. Quite arguably even the

⁹ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press. (1996) p. 199.

Amish are unopposed the educational aims Rawls thinks a liberal state should limit itself to in the way of promoting autonomy.

To indict sectarian education as such requires defining autonomy in a stronger fashion, which typically means something in line with the Enlightenment ideal of a profound kind of self-determination. Stephen Law, for example, insists on “Kant’s Enlightenment vision of a society of morally autonomous individuals who dare to apply their own intelligence rather than more-or-less uncritically accept the pronouncements of authority”¹⁰ and faults religious schools that do not aspire to encourage such an ambitious educational achievement. Roger Marples insists each child learn “how to live a life in accordance with a script she wrote for herself as opposed to one written for her by her parents, priests or peers”, and would abolish religious schools who fail to teach such a skill.¹¹ Once fostering an ability to arrive at one’s most fundamental beliefs and values independently, free from the undue influence of authority and tradition, is made the mark of successful schooling, it is a short step to the conclusion that theistic parents and educators are *as a kind* opposed to “genuine” education. This conclusion is frequently underscored by frequent uses of polemical terms such as “indoctrination” and “brainwashing” to describe what happens to children given a robustly religious education.

The problem here is plain. If by “autonomy” these thinkers mean something reasonable religious citizens might reject, it should not be the basis of binding law and

¹⁰ Stephen Law, *The War for Children’s Minds*. London: Routledge. (2007) p. 193.

¹¹ Roger “Marples, “Parents Rights and Educational Provision”, *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 33: 23 (2014).

policy. Nor can it ground a moral argument religious parents have any reason to take seriously depending as it would on assumptions those parents reject. Philosophers should be mindful of the many ways in which the plausibility of Kantian moral autonomy might be challenged by different philosophical—never mind religious—traditions. Melissa Moschella, for example, draws on St. Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle to argue teaching children to embrace the tenets of a moral or religious tradition relatively uncritically *enhances* their later autonomy.¹² But if the kind of autonomy at stake is weak enough to pass the lower bar of political liberalism, religious education is hardly the intrinsic threat it is being made out to be.

Conclusion

There are other arguments against religious schooling, and private schooling more generally, that I have not touched here, so the debate over the place of religious education in liberal democracy continues. Such debates, however, should reflect a more nuanced understanding of parental authority and avoid narrowly individualistic understandings of autonomy.

¹² See Melissa Moschella, *To Whom do Children Belong*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2016), Chapter 4. For an argument to the same effect drawing on empirical data, see Andrew M. Robinson. "Liberal-Democratic States Should Privilege Parental Efforts to Instill Identities and Values." *Theory and Research in Education* 15(2), 2017: 145-164.